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Catholic Charities' door will remain open during GOP convention

By **RANDY FURST**, Star Tribune

June 11, 2008

Catholic Charities will keep its homeless shelter and drop-in center for the poor open during the Republican National Convention, even though it's across the street from the site of the massive event at the Xcel Energy Center.

"We are going to stay right where we are," said the Rev. John Estrem, CEO of Catholic Charities of St. Paul and Minneapolis. "It was a tough call. We have 300 to 400 clients who have needs."

During three months of internal discussion, the charity considered temporarily closing the Dorothy Day Center and moving the operations elsewhere for the convention, Sept. 1-4. Estrem said, "We felt no pressure from anybody, from the city or police or the national convention."

He said local officials told him that once Catholic Charities made its decision they'd work out details with the center. "We will be outside the absolute secure zone," Estrem said. "We were told that by the city and the Secret Service. We also understand things can change."

Members of the GOP arrangements committee, which is organizing convention details, have volunteered in the past year at the center, serving lunch to the poor.

About 200 homeless people sleep on mats in the shelter nightly, and the center also functions as a drop-in center and dining facility for the poor, feeding 300 people at lunch and again at dinner, said Rebecca Lenz, a Catholic Charities spokeswoman.

Estrem said one reason Catholic Charities considered moving during the convention was concern that some clients suffer from mental illness, and that the crowds, noise and heavy security could prove difficult for them. He said the organization has several facilities in St. Paul and would provide an alternate shelter "for those clients who would find staying in the midst of all this activity difficult."

In one sense, Estrem said, it was a moral decision to stay at the site on Old 6th Street.

"In many ways the Dorothy Day Center is for many of our clients their home," he said. "That's where they live. That's where they stay. To shut down somebody's home is not something you do easily. If people lived in an apartment building across the street from the Xcel, nobody would say you have to vacate your home for a week.

"We have almost a covenant with these folks: We will provide for you, we are not going to move you around like a bunch of animals."

Also, Estrem said, even if Catholic Charities temporarily moved, clients might stay in the area anyway.

Mary Hall, Catholic Charities' temporary and permanent housing facility on Main Street, will remain open, but the agency's St. Paul office on Old 6th Street will relocate the majority of its services and staff during the convention.

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